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Murder and Self-constrained Modernity

Metaphysical Re-openings in Crime Fiction

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My topic in this paper is – what I in loose terms call – an observable re-opening of the relationship between modernity and religious metaphysics that has been taking place in recent Scandinavian crime fiction. Crime fiction has often been associated with western modernity, including the emergence of the modern cityscape, changes in juristic systems and the development of secular societies. In his *Fiction, Crime and Empire* (1993) Jon Thompson goes as far as to say that crime fiction was born out of the experience of urban modernity. In the history of crime fiction, this often leads to a tidy distinction between fictions dealing with verisimilar crime and detection one the hand and fictions dealing with supernatural appearances on the other. Notably, this dualistic border in genre fiction – often located between crime fiction and horror fiction – is found in the British inter-war Detection Club and unmistakably phrased by S.S. van Dine in his “Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories”:

“The problem of the crime must be solved by strictly naturalistic means. Such methods for learning the truth as slate-writing, ouija-boards, mind-reading, spiritualistic seances, crystal-gazing, and the like, are taboo. A reader has a chance when matching his wits with a rationalistic detective, but if he must compete with the world of spirits and go chasing about the fourth dimension of metaphysics, he is defeated *ab initio*.”

Nevertheless, during the past twenty years in Scandinavian crime fiction several popular and less read authors in crime fiction have reinstated an interest in metaphysics and particularly religious discussions.

At first, here, I will line out a few significant examples taken from the vast corpus of Scandinavian crime fiction published from the late eighties until today. These are but a pivotal excerpt from a wider selection of works that I am working on at the moment. This does as well mean that the conclusions in this paper are introductory mappings of the field in question. For the introductory purpose of clarity I have translated all the mentioned titles into English (I leave the original titles in brackets). Secondly, I will attempt a more cultural explanation of why we see this re-opening interest in religious metaphysics in crime fiction. My examples are by no means adequate, but they supply the general idea of how crime fiction breaks into religious discussions. I will take you through three examples – one Norwegian, one Danish, and one Swedish.

My first example is the productive Norwegian author Gunnar Staalesen. He is one of the earliest Scandinavian crime fiction writers to pay attention to this new shift in the cultural landscape. In his *Fallen Angels* [*Falne engler*] from 1988 his iconic private detective Varg Veum meets an old classmate who gets into trouble. Very early in the novel this friend asks Veum: “How do you feel about Jesus?” Veum, at first, takes no notice of the question, but as the novel evolves the plot gets entangled in religious concerns – and Veum, upon confronting a conservative priest, has to answer the opening question in the novel. What initially seems off-hand becomes a central issue in the novel. Gunnar Staalesen returns to Christian references in his two novels *As If in a Mirror*

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[*Som i et speil*] from 2002 and *Face to Face* [*Ansikt til ansikt*] from 2004 that together specifically refer to Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians and applies its meaning to the plots of the novels. The first novel *As If in a Mirror* leaves the detective a bit baffled and with a few untied ends. Here we might need to say that at the time of Christ mirrors were burnished metal and hence a bit unclear – and so are the plot ties in Staalesen’s novel. The next novel, though, *Face to Face* – with no apparent plot relation – has a much more clear-cut ending. In Paul’s letter the idea of being face to face refers to how we meet God in the afterlife and, thus, it becomes a metaphor for religious truth. This becomes, in Staalesen’s novel, a metaphor for investigative truth.

My second example is the Danish author Henning Mortensen. He takes – in his so-called Sondrup Trilogy (2005-2007) – modern metaphysical tendencies very seriously in three novels that explicitly connect crime fiction with metaphysical discussions. Initially, he quotes the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein and throughout the novels an indirect discussion of his philosophy seeps in. Ironically, one of the characters makes a very clear reference to the early Wittgenstein by noting that ‘we should not talk about what we cannot know’.

However, the trilogy ends up saying plenty about things we normally know nothing about. This results in stories about spirits that are neither quite dead nor alive as well as flying pigs and the like. Even though these things can seem highly carnevalesque, the novels – on the contrary – wind up serious, critical remarks about Danish integration policy. This discussion is, then, part of a larger reflection on the problematic relationship between modernity and metaphysics in western societies – it is, then, of course not by chance that one of ‘the good guys’ is called Ludwig and one of ‘the bad guys’ is called Immanuel with an obvious reference to the differences between the philosophies of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Immanuel Kant.

And before getting into my third example I want to mention some the recent stories that deal with these questions. Gretelise Holm’s Danish *Hardened Thistle Temperaments* [*Forhærdede Tidselgemytter*] from 2009 – with a title reference to the Danish pietistic psalm writer Brorson – is a general discussion of the Church of Denmark. Anette Broberg Knudsen’s very recent Danish novel *Reasonable Suspicion* [*Begrundet mistanke*] from this year – besides being a straightforward crime novel – is an overall debate on the Christian forgiveness. Anne Holt’s latest Norwegian novel *The Money Man* [*Pengemanden*] from 2009 discusses the Norwegian church’s view on homophilia. Svend Åge Madsen’s recent Danish novel *Many Evil Schemes* [*Mange sære ting for*] also from 2009 delves into ancient theological debates on the immaculate conception of Jesus. In recent TV-series – although on a minor level – we see a similar development. Especially the character La Cour in the Danish series *Unit One* [*Rejseholdet*] from 2000 and onwards is interesting in his application of clairvoyant detection and metaphysical sensibilities^{1, 2, 3}.

My third and last example here is the Swedish author Arne Dahl – he is as well the most pertinent example. His novels *Many Waters* [*De största vatten*] from 2002 and *Requiem* [*Dödsmässa*] from 2004 bear its Christian references in the titles. The first refers to the Biblical Song of Songs whereas the last points towards the Catholic mass for the dead. In addition to placing evident references, many of the narratives throughout his eleven crime novels leave a trace of an ongoing metaphysical discussion – a discussion most prevalent in *Requiem*, *Hidden Numbers* [*Mörkertal*] from 2005 and *Eye in the Sky* [*Himmelsöga*] from 2007.

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Generally, several police officers throughout the series apply intuitive insight instead of hardcore evidential investigation. This results in catchphrase comments, in particular *Eye in the Sky*, where officers specifically discuss their – with a phrase from the novel – ‘incipient metaphysics’. The eye in the title refers to the surveillance society, but is of course as well a metaphorical positioning of God. In *Hidden Numbers* Dahl includes a well-placed discussion of what the novel calls ‘a dark, intangible under current underneath the strive for light and clarity of the Age of Enlightenment’. *Hidden numbers* – the novel’s title – is a term for crimes that go by unnoticed, but here Dahl uses it as a cultural description of the metaphysical droppings of Enlightenment.

This is as well evident in *Requiem* where Dahl specifically uses Mozart’s *Requiem* as the fundamental tone of the novel. Mozart, especially at the time of writing *Requiem*, located himself in an age of changes. Mozart died in 1791 leaving his mass for the dead unfinished in an age where the Enlightenment process was catching on; regarding these questions he was in two minds and was highly affected by the cultural upheavels. In Dahl’s novel, the use of Mozart’s *Requiem*, then, has two meanings. First of all, it applies to his general philosophical point – most clearly articulated in his *A Midsommer-night’s Dream* [*En midsommarnattsdröm*] from 2003: the idea that culturally we must never come to think that everything is finished. When Mozart’s *Requiem* is performed the conductor chooses – because it was left undone – among different drafts and the mass is, then, as well ‘never finished’. But for Dahl the reverse age of changes seems to be taking place at the time of writing: Modern society seems to be showing metaphysical cracks and through those cracks the undercurrent of Enlightenment seems to be leaking back into modernity⁴.

This takes me to the last part of my paper – my attempt to explain *why* we see this interest in metaphysics and religiousness in recent crime fiction. The afore mentioned examples are all, to mention but a few, Scandinavian examples with contemporary plots, though they are all noticeable illustrations of a drift in crime fiction towards a revitalized metaphysics adjusted towards a late modern society.

The history of crime fiction shows – very much like the history of modernity – an undercurrent dissimilar from the mainstream. Firstly, I have myself done some work into Chinese crime fiction that was popularized in press during the 13th Century – and here, among other things, we see a very clear interplay between investigative deductions and helpful, supernatural tools. Nevertheless, this shows internationally that crime fiction and supernatural metaphysics is not necessarily an ill-matched couple. William David Spencer, then, in his *Mysterium and Mystery*, goes through – besides Biblical references – several texts ranging throughout the 20th Century. These fictions approach crime fiction with religious interest and hence he terms his corpus of texts *clerical crime novels*. Robert S. Paul approaches crime fiction from a theological point of view in his *Whatever Happened to Sherlock Holmes?* – the subtitle of the book is *Detective Fiction, Popular Theology, and Society*. Paul explains the interest of crime fiction in social relations as – perhaps intentionally self-contradictory, though – *a secular theology*. Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney (ed.) refers to this undercurrent of metaphysics in their *Detecting Texts* as ‘the metaphysical detective story’ ranging from Poe to postmodernism.

These examples do show that there seems to be more to crime fiction than cold deductions. Though, at first I will need to take look at modernity, since – as we have seen – it is a general understanding in dealing with crime fiction that it develops out of modern components. This basic assertion is highly debatable, but there is nevertheless

Do not quote – work in progress!

no doubt that modernity has left at least a noteworthy impact on western crime fiction. One of the key issues of modernity is that religion and man's relation to God is made private and society is understood in secular terms – assertions normally associated with Max Weber's sociology of religion. Nature becomes disenchanted; human rights evolve from social ethics; and individualism and personal autonomy replaces collective ideals. Politics become worldly while religion and metaphysics loses its grip on society. Religion is excluded as a private space unneeded for social, political relationships. This explanation of modernity is as well what affects the British Detection Club and van Dine when they approach metaphysical components as taboo.

During the 20th Century, though, something has changed in modernity's relation to metaphysics. I approach an explanation from the point of view of what the Danish philosopher Hans Jørgen Schanz calls *self-constrained modernity*: Modernity itself has come to realize – he explicates – that it cannot provide complete explanations of reality and, thus, it becomes self-constrained. This, says Schanz, re-opens modernity's interest in metaphysics. He writes (my translation):

“The new in today's modernity is that this room for religion, now for the first time, so to speak, is granted by the modern itself because of the widespread experience in modernity itself of modernity's character as a predominantly pragmatic matter of course. As a consequence, an opinionated or normative self-constraining of modernity is taking place. Modernity has never been able to answer the above mentioned questions.”

These questions are – according to Schanz – questions of suffering, grief, death, evil and several questions of more existential character. And these are indeed predominant questions in most crime fiction. In saying so, the sensibilities of crime fiction seem to reflect this re-opening of modernity: If western crime fiction, firstly, is connected to the social modes of modernity, and modernity, secondly, has become self-constrained so that it leaves open a few cracks for metaphysics to seep through, then crime fiction is, once again, left – in its apparent social sensibilities – with cracks open for religious discussions and reflections upon metaphysics.

The question is of course, then, what kind of metaphysics and religion we are left with. In reference to undercurrent of Enlightenment – or the droppings of secular society – Arne Dahl notes in *Hidden numbers* that ‘one cannot exist without the other’. Modernity needs metaphysics to evolve, while metaphysics dialectically changes into something else. In his novel *Requiem*, a scientist placed in Stalingrad during the Second World War is writing a diary that is, then, read by a present character throughout the novel. Here, he directly addresses God by writing “God, whom I don't believe in”. This speech act does in fact both imply that God does and does not exist. This indicates an un-dogmatic religion and – what I, for the lack of a better term, define as – a *metaphysics of uncertainty*, a grace of doubt.

The rational mind of the novel's scientist excludes religion, but in the time of crisis – in the midst of war – he turns to God for the lack of anything better. This means, nevertheless, that Schanz' argument needs a slight rephrasing, because it is *not* only modernity that has become self-constrained. Metaphysics has itself as well become self-constrained. This becomes, according to the conclusions in Arne Dahl's novel, a pragmatic dialectic where ‘nothing is ever finished’.

However, though I leave some loose ends, this is where I will finish.

ENDNOTES

¹ These trends are as well in evidence in the writings of the Swedish author Henning Mankell, though it is not as direct as many other apparent examples. Besides his police officer Wallander being a ‘hopeless’ romantic – in the epochal sense of the word – Mankell opens up discussions of inapproachable violence – a certain type of violence that he designates ‘the Swedish uneasiness’. Especially the brief short story “The Fracture” [“Sprickan”] from 1999 deals with an unexplainable metaphysical horror. Here, Wallander meets a brutality that – as the short story phrases it – ‘neither necessary nor unnecessary’, but instead paradoxically unexplainable. Throughout the suite about Wallander Mankell deals with changes in modern societies that leave a blank, a violent rupture, that he phrases *uneasiness*: Underneath the idyllic surface something indistinguishable and intangible erupts into violence. This is generally what often sets Wallander off into a state of melancholia.

² Another example, Stieg Larsson – a recent media phenomenon in crime fiction comparable with the success of Dan Brown – reveal both an attention to the cloaked and mysterious conspiracies of society while putting a speculative, religious symbolism on display – however fictional the narratives may be. Especially the first novel, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* [*Män som hatar kvinnor*] from 2005 – as well as the first parts of the film and TV-series – takes part in an overall discussion of the Biblical view on women, but the narratives include commonplace references to Christian topoi, such as resurrection and the obvious fact that the character Lisbeth Salander, for instance, is crucified – in this case, in the media – on Good Friday.

³ Åsa Larssons Swedish novel *Sun Storm* [*Solstorm*] from 2003 is a novel about Christian fundamentalism, which as well goes for Henning Mankell’s *Before the Frost* [*Innan frosten*] from 2002.

⁴ As a further illustration of this re-opening, the Danish church and Danish theologians have become exceedingly interested in the ways of crime fiction. This may be a means to lean on the success of a popular genre *or* it may be a significant insinuation of a cultural drift towards a meeting point between crime fiction and religious thought. After having been part of a research project in crime fiction throughout the past few years, I have seen an increasing interest in for instance a supposed bond between crime fiction and Christianity, and I have frequently been invited by theologians or journalist to give lectures or interviews on this particular question. From a more academic point of view articles are as well written about these questions. In a rather short anthology with the debatable title *Jesus as a Bookworm* [*Jesus som bogorm*] from 2009 about the Christ figure in recent Scandinavian literature the first two articles – by among others theologian Pernille Østrem – are, surprisingly enough, about crime fiction, i.e. Stieg Larsson and Åsa Larsson. The anthology is edited by the Danish theologian Svend Bjerg (et.al.) and is published by Alfa, which is a Danish book publisher with special attention to theology and religion. Internationally, interesting academic work is done by the Finish theologian Risto Saarinen who introduces interesting perspectives as to why we detect this development in crime fiction – his view on crime fiction is that it replaces the Christian discussion about God and evil, the so-called question of *theodicy*. The basic idea, though, is that we see these occurrences and interests going both ways: from crime fiction into metaphysics and theology and from theology back into crime fiction.